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Civic Learning & Engagement

Civic Engagement among 2-year and 4-year College Students

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There is a strong link in the United States between education and political and civic participation. Those who spend more years in school and college are more likely to vote, volunteer, and otherwise participate. Most of the available research contrasts people with bachelor's degrees, those with high school degrees, and those who have not completed high school. It finds large differences in civic engagement, with the college graduates well ahead. This pattern does not necessarily show that colleges and universities enhance students' civic skills and interests; it may rather be that education confers social advantages that aid civic participation.

There is little available data that focuses on the large group of Americans who study in community colleges, either finishing their education with associates' degrees or moving on to bachelor's degree programs. This fact sheet uses one relatively recent dataset to look closely at community college students. It shows that they generally fall between 4-year college students and high school graduates in their civic engagement. In some respects, community college students (especially transfers) are quite close to those who hold bachelor's degrees, although they come from less advantaged backgrounds.

This fact sheet uses the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88). NELS:88 provides a nationally representative large sample of young people who were 8th graders in 1988 and followed up subsequently in 1990, 1992 (when they were high school seniors), 1994, and 2000 (at the age of 26).² While this is not a recent dataset (young people in this data collection were in college in the mid 1990s), it does provide a detailed account of the post-secondary experiences of students. It offers information on three main forms of engagement: voting, volunteering, and following the news.

Identifying the Post-Secondary Experiences of Young People

Many young people have experiences in community colleges *and* 4-year institutions. Thus these students cannot be classified as just community college students, nor can they be classified as four-year institution students. Given these challenges, we have created four mutually exclusive measures of post-secondary enrollment for this cohort:³

- No college experience (26%)
- Only attended a 2-year institution (23%)
- Attended both a 2-year and a 4-year institution (18%)
- Only attended a 4-year institution (32%)

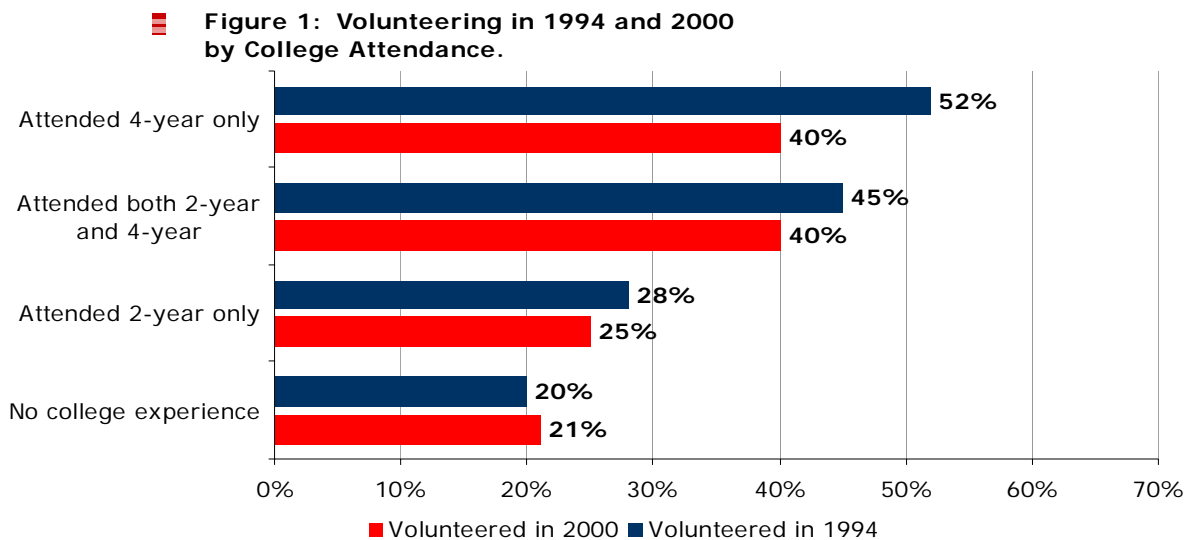
The cohort followed by NELS:88 was surveyed at the ages of 14, 16, 18, 20, and 26. Since many 2-year college students are older than age 26, this analysis likely misses the experiences of a significant portion of the 2-year college population. Further, many of the young people in this longitudinal survey may have not completed their educational experiences by 2000. Last, this survey collection misses the experiences of young people who immigrated to the U.S. after the age of 14, but are of the same cohort as those in the survey. As a result, the proportion of young people with some college experience in this cohort is different from that reported elsewhere as young people who did not go through the U.S. school system are not measured by this survey.

Volunteering

Volunteering in 1994 and 2000

NELS:88 contains several questions about volunteering activities in the 1994 and 2000 follow-up survey waves. The 1994 survey wave data collection occurred when the cohort was two years out of high school, and has a larger amount of information on volunteering activity than the 2000 survey wave data collection. However, both data collections ask about volunteering activity in the 12 months prior to the survey date.⁴ Reported volunteering figures from 1994 and 2000 are shown in figure 1.

Two patterns are immediately evident. First, those who have attended 4-year institutions report higher levels of volunteering in both 1994 and 2000 than young people with other college experiences. For example, those who attended only 4-year colleges reported a volunteering rate of 52% in 1994 and 40% in 2000. This is in contrast to a reported volunteering rate among those who attended only a 2-year college of 28% and 25% in 1994 and 2000 respectively. Those with no college experience also reported volunteering, but at rates that are lower than either group that attended college, 20% and 21% for 1994 and 2000 respectively.



Where College Students Report Volunteering in 1994

Table 1 below shows where young college students from the high school class of 1992 reported volunteering in 1994. Young people are classified by their post-secondary trajectory. Young people with no college experience, and those who attended only 2-year colleges are more likely to report volunteering for unions and church organizations than their

counterparts with some 4-year college experience. In contrast, those who attended both 2-year and 4-year colleges, or only 4-year colleges are more likely to have volunteered in organized activities (such as volunteering at a hospital) and for educational organizations when compared to their counterparts with no 4-year college experience.

Table 1 – Where Volunteering Occurred in 1994 by College Attendance Type
Weighted results

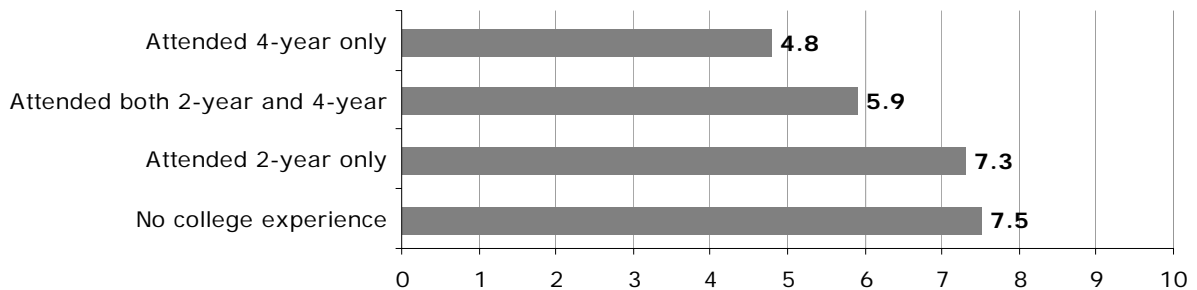
	<i>No College Experience</i>	<i>2-Year Only</i>	<i>Both 2-Year and 4-Year</i>	<i>4-Year Only</i>
<i>Organizations where volunteered</i>				
Youth	12%	11%	12%	11%
Union	3%	2%	1%	1%
Political	1%	2%	3%	3%
Church	24%	25%	15%	13%
Organized (Hospital, etc)	17%	17%	20%	23%
Sports teams or clubs	13%	18%	15%	14%
Educational	7%	8%	15%	14%
Other	23%	17%	19%	20%

Source: Authors' tabulations from NELS:88, fourth follow-up.

Average Hours Volunteered in 1994

Average weekly hours spent volunteering in 1994 are reported in figure 2. Immediately evident in this figure is the fact that young people with no college experience reported spending the most time volunteering. They volunteered at a rate of 7.5 hours on average, while those who attended 4-year institutions only, for example, reported 4.8 hours of volunteering per week in 1994. The source of this difference may come from the type of volunteering that young people perform. Since those with no college experience are more likely to volunteer with their churches, this might lead to relatively more hours volunteering per week than those who volunteer for education organizations, where they may tutor for a few hours a week.

Figure 2: Reported Weekly Average Hours Volunteered in 1994, by College Attendance

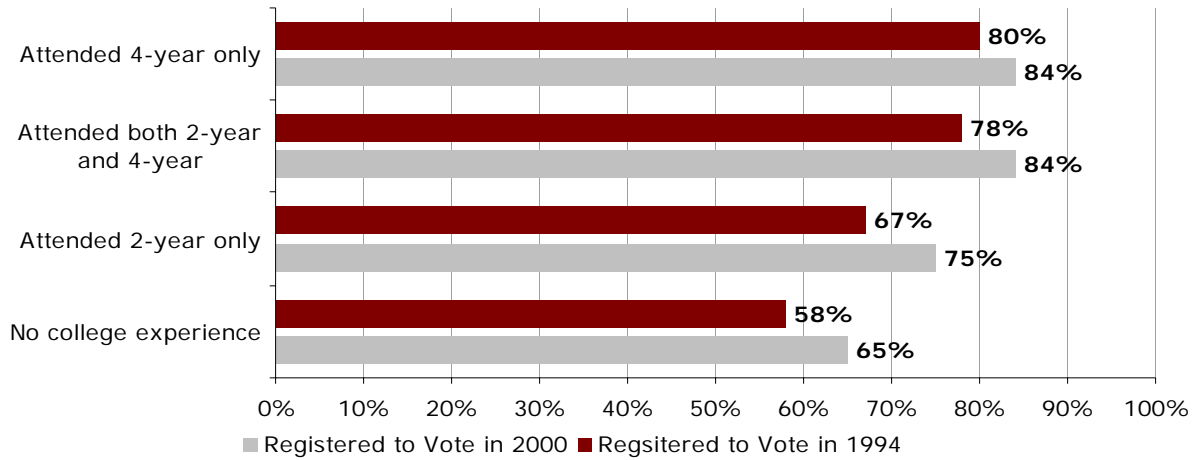


Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988.

Registering to Vote in 1994 and 2000

Self-reported voter registration rates in 1994 and 2000 by college attendance level are shown in figure 3. Across all groups, there is a high-level self-reported voter registration that appears to be higher than that observed in the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey November Supplements in 1994 and 2000. However, even though self-reported levels of voter registration appear inflated, some differences are again evident across young people by the type of institution they attended. First, those who attended 4-year institutions report the highest levels of voter registration in 1994 and 2000. Second, voter registration levels are slightly higher in 2000 than in 1994 for all groups. Third, the gap between those who attended 4-year institutions and those who did not attend college is approximately 20 percentage points in 1994 and 2000.

Figure 3: Reported Voter Registration in 1994 and 2000 by College Attendance.

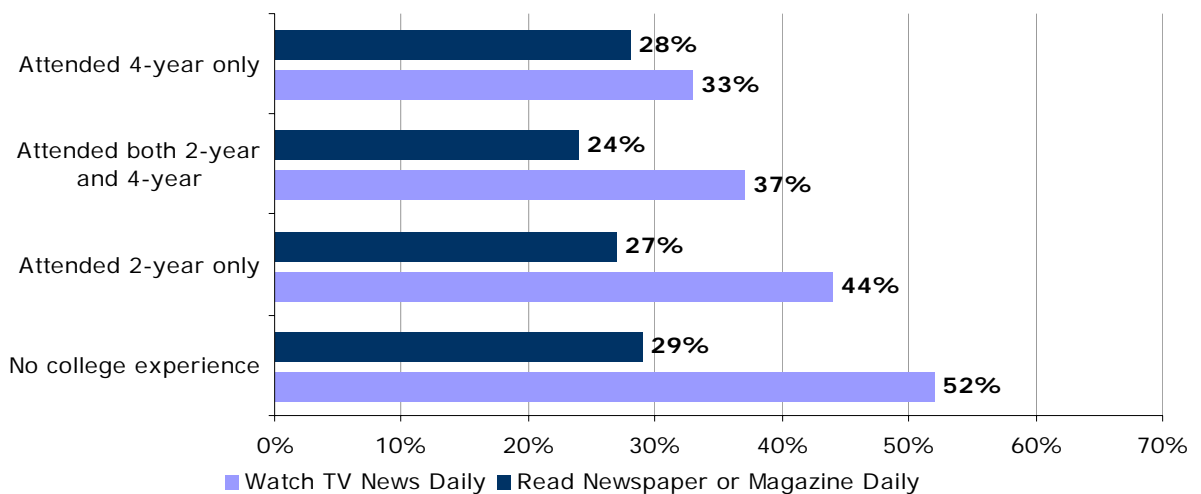


Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988.

News Consumption in 2000

In the 2000 wave survey data collection, survey participants were asked about their sources for news, and how often they obtain news from those sources. Figures for daily newspaper and magazine readership and television news viewership are shown in figure 4. Newspaper consumption, no matter the post-secondary experience of a young person, is low. On average 27 percent of young people reported that they read a newspaper or magazine daily in 2000. However, some significant differences in daily television news viewership are evident. Those who have no college experience report the highest levels of daily television news watching in 2000, while those with the greatest level of college exposure report the lowest levels of television news viewership.

Figure 4: Reported News Consumption in 2000 by College Attendance.



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988.

**Appendix Table 1 – Civic Engagement Activities
by Highest Degree Obtained, by 1994 and 2000**

Weighted results

	<i>No Degree/ no college experience</i>	<i>No degree/ some college experience</i>	<i>Certificate</i>	<i>AA degree</i>	<i>BA degree</i>	<i>MA degree or more</i>
1994						
Volunteered in 12 months prior to April 1994	20%	33%	27%	35%	54%	66%
<i>Organizations where volunteered</i>						
Youth	14%	10%	9%	15%	11%	12%
Union	3%	1%	2%	2%	1%	0%
Political	1%	2%	0%	4%	3%	3%
Church	24%	22%	19%	20%	11%	11%
Organized (Hospital, etc)	17%	18%	22%	17%	23%	20%
Sports teams or clubs	13%	18%	11%	18%	11%	11%
Educational	6%	11%	8%	7%	19%	27%
Other	22%	17%	28%	17%	20%	17%
Average Hours Volunteering in a week	7.5	7.1	7.4	6.6	4.4	4.6
2000						
Volunteered in 12 months prior to April 2000	20%	28%	33%	29%	42%	46%
1994						
Registered to Vote	58%	71%	63%	73%	82%	83%
Voted in any local, state, or national election 12 months prior to April 1994	21%	32%	30%	38%	41%	46%
Voted in 1992 Presidential Election	29%	49%	38%	52%	65%	65%
2000						
Registered to Vote	65%	78%	77%	80%	85%	89%
Voted in 1996 Presidential Election	36%	56%	49%	64%	70%	72%
Voted in 24 months prior to April 2000	28%	41%	40%	50%	50%	54%
Read Newspaper Daily	28%	28%	29%	26%	25%	29%
Watch TV News Daily	51%	43%	47%	39%	31%	29%

Source: Authors' tabulations from NELS:88, fourth follow-up.

**Appendix Table 2 – Civic Engagement Activities
by First College Type Attended, 1994 and 2000**

Weighted results

	<i>No College Experience</i>	<i>First Institution is 2-year</i>	<i>First Institution is 4-year</i>
1994			
Volunteered in 12 months prior to April 1994	20%	31%	52%
<i>Organizations where volunteered</i>			
Youth	12%	12%	11%
Union	3%	2%	1%
Political	1%	2%	3%
Church	24%	22%	13%
Organized (Hospital, etc)	17%	18%	22%
Sports teams or clubs	13%	18%	12%
Educational	7%	9%	18%
Other	23%	16%	20%
Average Hours Volunteering in a week	7.5	7.0	5.0
2000			
Volunteered in 12 months prior to April 2000	21%	29%	40%
1994			
Registered to Vote	58%	71%	79%
Voted in any local, state, or national election 12 months prior to April 1994	22%	35%	38%
Voted in 1992 Presidential Election	30%	50%	60%
2000			
Registered to Vote	65%	78%	84%
Voted in 1996 Presidential Election	37%	58%	66%
Voted in 24 months prior to April 2000	29%	42%	49%
Read Newspaper Daily	29%	25%	27%
Watch TV News Daily	52%	42%	34%

Source: Authors' tabulations from NELS:88, fourth follow-up.

Notes

¹ Research Director and Research Assistant respectively, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, University of Maryland School of Public Policy. We thank Peter Levine and the CIRCLE staff for comments on previous drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in fact or interpretation are our own.

² The sample size for NELS:88 was over 20,000 in 1988. Only a sub-sample of the original 20,000 survey respondents was followed through 2000. The sample size of the 2000 survey wave was 12,144. Utilizing only those who participated in all waves of the survey results in a sample size of 10,827.

³ There is more than one way to classify young people by their post-secondary experiences. These include the following possible classification schemes:

- Type of institution first attended: This comprises the mutually-exclusive measures of:
 - No college experience
 - First attended a 2-year institution
 - First attended a 4-year institution
- Highest Degree Attained: This measure comprises the following mutually-exclusive measures:
 - No degree and no college experience
 - No degree but some college experience
 - Certificate degree
 - Associates degree
 - Bachelors degree
 - Advanced Degree
- Ever attended a post-secondary institution. This comprises two measures, "Ever attended a 2-year college?" and "Ever attended a 4-year college?" These measures are not mutually exclusive.

Civic engagement patterns for the first two above systems are presented in the appendix of this fact sheet. Note that no matter which system we use to classify the post-secondary experiences of young people, the patterns of civic engagement are the same as those presented in the fact sheet.

⁴ Both survey waves were conducted in the spring of their respective year.